

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 13 - From Dishwasher to Executive Chef

Victor Scargle: All the mentors I've had, they've known how to push me, and maybe push me to the point where it's a stretch, but not over it. Seeing what their capabilities are and then saying, okay, I think you can go a little bit further.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to another episode of Our Food Journey™, a podcast from Hormel Foods. Today we're featuring a conversation with Master Chef Ron DeSantis and renowned chef Victor Scargle. Victor began working in the kitchen at age thirteen, and over the last several decades he's been executive chefs at Lucy Restaurant in Yountville, Go Fish restaurant in St. Helena, Grand Cafe in San Francisco, and Pisces in Burlingame. He's also held critical jobs at Aqua in Las Vegas and San Francisco and at the Tribeca Grill in New York City. So if you're interested in how someone works their way up in the food world, and what motivates a top chef and what it takes to run a fine restaurant, you're going to enjoy this conversation between Victor Scargle and Ron DeSantis.

Ron DeSantis: Hello. I'm Ron DeSantis, certified Master Chef, and I am with chef Victor Scargle.

Victor: Great to be here. Thanks for coming and joining us in the Napa Valley.

Ron: So, when did food become an influence for you?

Victor: I grew up in Aptos, which is a small town in Santa Cruz County, surrounded by the agriculture that's really... Driscoll strawberries that I've seen in India, I've seen in France—I've seen everywhere—are in Watsonville, which is five miles away. Growing up around horses, goats, chicken farms and chickens and those things, food became important right away.

My mom was not a big cook, so it became important for several reasons. One, because I had such great product around. And two, because I wanted to eat. At some point she said, look, you guys can start to make some stuff for yourself as well. But I can remember climbing trees. And the tree that was in the horse corral was an apricot tree, and I have yet, to this day, to find an apricot that gives me the same memory that I had as being a child in that tree, eating them until I was sick to my stomach. That's hard to find and recapture.

So early ages, I remember that. Chickens as well. Being around chicken farms, I can remember, at a young age, making lemon meringue pies with these warm brown eggs, and the meringue on them, it seemed like—at that time—was eight inches. I know it wasn't, but because it was so fresh and because of the understanding of that, and then trying to make it with something else and you didn't get the same result, and you did the same techniques, and you realized it was the ingredients. So food became important early on.

Ron: So that is really great to hear. I find that many times when you talk with chefs, for some reason you have those kinds of really great memories at an early age. Speaking of early age, you started early in the food business, in a restaurant. Talk about the first experience.

Victor: Our family would go to a restaurant once or twice a week. There was a local steak restaurant where they would give you the meat on a wood board, and it was raw and you'd go and put it on the grill yourself and cook it yourself. Then you'd go to the salad bar—and they had baked beans or potatoes or whatever, really rustic—but I would cook the meat. I would go and do it and put it on there. So then when I was old enough, I got a chance to work there, as a dishwasher of course, or bussing tables and really doing whatever just to be in that environment.

So being thirteen and a half years old and being around what seemed like adults—in the restaurant industry I don't know that we're ever adults—but being around that, there was a certain amount of adrenaline. And there was another opportunity to work in another restaurant in the area that was a steak, seafood restaurant. There was an opportunity to be a prep cook there. So going from dishwasher or bussing tables to being a prep cook, well, that's a big deal. That's your first step to getting closer to being a line cook. So thirteen-and-a-half at the time, you could get a work permit and do that. So that's what I did.

You start to—as you know, you're a chef—you start to get addicted to this kind of adrenaline. You never know what's going to happen and whatever happens you're just going to figure it out. So going from being a prep cook to then... Well, one of the cooks leaves, as people do, turnover, and then, well, do you want to do it? Sure, I'll make salads. It gets addicting. And then it was, well what are you going to do?

You're going to go off to college because all of your friends are. So I started applying to colleges. I went down to Santa Barbara. I enjoyed the stock market and economics in high school, so that's what I thought I wanted to do, and didn't realize that Santa Barbara was all accounting. It took about two weeks of accounting classes at UC Santa Barbara with five hundred upper classmen in the class to realize that wasn't for me. So I started looking quickly into restaurant jobs again.

Luckily I found a great chef in the area who was very professional. He taught a lot, and you knew when he was upset. He didn't have to throw things, he didn't have to yell or whatever, so very early on I saw one way to lead and then worked for other people who led differently, let's just put it that way. I had a good foundation of, well you can run a large operation without throwing things or getting too carried away, and saw it was possible. He was very instrumental with me developing, and he said look, you can stay here for another year—I worked there for a year—or you can find a city where you want to live and a great chef and just go work there. You're going to get beat up, but you're going to learn a lot. Find someone you're going to learn a lot from.

So that's what sent me to Miami. I was looking at Hawaii and Miami, Florida. Across the water or across the country. I found a great chef in Florida to go work for, and man, such a different culture and cuisine and people, and the workforce is coming from Hati, from Europe, from these other areas that I had never been around. The food was totally different. Different fish, different produce, different influences. Really opened my eyes to a lot of things.

Ron: How old were you around then? Eighteen? Nineteen?

Victor: I turned twenty one on South Beach, so it was a fun time. And at that time, Miami has done this ebb and flow of tons of influence and building and things, and then kind of flattens out. At the time Versace was building his house, we were right on ocean drive and he was building it right up the road and it was booming and people were trying to do upscale things on the beach, and it was super exciting. The food scene was just booming, there was this group of people, Norman Van Aken and Alan Susser, Robbin

Haas, who I worked for, and Doug Rodriguez, and these guys were really doing this inventive, great food that was so different than anything I had seen.

Ron: I still use Doug Rodriguez's book. It's got great stuff in there.

Victor: That's where I ended up going after that.

Ron: Oh, good.

Victor: My friend Michael who I was working with—there's always this network of chefs. We all cross paths eventually—my friend Michael went up to New York to work for Doug to open Patria in New York, and Robbin, who I was working for, suggested I look at Park Avenue Cafe and David Burke, so I went and looked at both places, and both were phenomenal, but very different. The vibe, the energy at Patria was like nothing I had ever seen before. And different. Not that there isn't an intensity and energy at Park Avenue, the food was amazing, I mean David Burke is so genius with his food, but Patria was so different.

So I went there and I saw it and I was like okay, I'm going to go work at Patria. I did that for a year. So it was a year in Miami and a year in New York. And it was like okay, I need to come back West. I set up all these interviews with these great chefs, and the first interview off the plane—like two hours off the plane in San Francisco—was with Michael Mina, and he had just taken over, at Aqua, the reins completely. It was a Friday night, and I'd seen fine dining before, but fine dining at that pace—seven courses, doing one hundred fifty, two hundred covers in 1995—at that level, that energy was like, wow.

This food, the operation, the intensity. He told me, if you want to work here, you've gotta tell me now, because there's so many other people looking for this job. You've gotta take it now, and I'm going to pay you this. And I was like, I don't know if I can live on that, but I did. I spent almost five years with Michael, with a stint in between going back to New York before the other projects really kicked off. I learned so much about business and building a brand through that process.

Ron: It's interesting, that part, because it's something that you're a student of, it sounds like, to realize... The cooking and the food is critical to what we do as a craft, but there's a whole other end to it. I was going to say, who influenced you, but you just named everybody that is so critical in this business that are able to influence you, and you were fortunate you ended up in these places, because, just like you said, you learned about the business end of it. That's something that a lot of chefs, they miss that element of it.

Victor: Right. And I think there are so many talented chefs, but there are so few—it's almost a shame—that know how to cost a dish. And if you don't know the finance of it, no matter how much money is behind you, you won't be around for very long.

Ron: So that two weeks of accounting in university paid off in the long run. It was a good thing. Let me shift this a little bit. What kinds of things outside the culinary world are you interested in or affect you? And they're probably all related to culinary eventually, but...

Victor: Yeah, they are somewhat. I've got this twelve year old at home that influences a lot right now. I think this, or any industry, can be consuming. To be the best in any industry, you could spend all hours of

the day, all days of the week doing it. But you gotta realize that in order to get refilled and to be the best, you have to step away a little bit.

Whenever I get around chefs, I ask them—I was around Thomas Keller when we were at Copio, years ago—and I say, what do you do? Do you cycle? What do you do to get...? Everybody's got something. I think his is golf now. It's not like it's relaxing because it's such a mind game, but it's something different that gets him to refocus so that when he goes back into the kitchen, he's reenergized.

So for me, it's different stuff with my son, whether it's supporting him with Tae Kwon Do or music, gardening at home. There's nothing I like to do more than going in the back yard and physically pulling stuff out of the ground and digging stuff up and planting stuff. The sense of accomplishment when something actually grows is pretty cool. I've known a lot of great farmers in the valley, and I was able to pull off growing avocados in Napa, which one of my farming friends wasn't able to do and I was like, yes, I did it. But it took eight years to get that to happen. But wow, what a sense of accomplishment and fun to see that live.

Ron: It is. You're absolutely right. Having those kinds of ways to refocus and recharge your energy is good. Travelling? Do you do much travelling? What do you like to travel towards? And what kind of food things happen during travel?

Victor: In the last year or so I've been able to go to Mexico, to Tulum, Mexico. So us on the West Coast, we're used to going straight down. But to go to Tulum, which is all of a sudden this hotbed for restaurants. You've got a chef from Noma coming over and doing pop ups and all these people doing all this great food over there. So I went to Tulum, Mexico. I went to France last year for six weeks. Experiencing that and then going into Paris and then home, what a unique adventure.

And then just a few months ago I was in India. No idea what to expect. None whatsoever. What product am I going to be able to get, what is illegal, what isn't illegal—because I brought some food products with me that weren't legal in the whole country and I didn't know—what spices? How do they cook? What gets them excited, and what's even available? To go into Bangalore, which is a pretty industrial city, we took a drive a couple hours outside the city to see this farm that this gentleman started.

Amazing products. Like what we saw in our garden here today, he's growing in India, which is a water starved area, which is a place that's densely populated in those parts, and he's taking the time and energy... I can't imagine the financial output and investment to just find a chef or a couple chefs that will start this trend of organic produce. And he's doing it. So that was really a highlight of the trip to see that.

Just experiencing all these things, and then not going to the fancy restaurants, but going to where the locals eat. I think that a lot of what we do as chefs is going to where the locals eat. You may not know what that is, you may not know what it says on the menu, but I want to see what you eat and how you cook at home. Because that's really where the roots are.

Ron: It sure is. So, food trends. Do you follow them? Do you find that any are worth thinking about? What do you see down the road?

Victor: I think the biggest trend that—I think I've been saying it for probably at least five years now—is that people are going back to what we used to do. Starting to see the whole animal, the head to toe, complete utilization. If we're going to harvest this animal, we're going to use it all. No longer is it cool just to pull the rack off the lamb and we're not worried where the rest of it goes. No, we're going to use

every piece of it. We're going to make sausages, we're going to make meats, we're going to make patés. Whatever we're doing, we're going to honor this animal by using all of it. And that's what needs to happen. If you talk about biodiversity and sustainability, if we're going to do this, we're going to use it all.

Ron: A couple more questions. One, you mentioned biodynamic farming. Talk about that. How do you put that into simple terms so that the layperson, the lay-chef can understand what biodynamic farming is.

Victor: It's basically thinking about the effects that everything has on that particular item where produce is being grown. So if you think about what we were talking about earlier, you are what you eat, and if the soil isn't happy, it's not going to make a great product. That great product—or bad product—goes into our body, we're not going to be happy. If I eat garbage, like we talked about, we know we make bad choices and we decide to do that, we're going to feel that the next day. If the soil, and we haven't done these properties to take care of the soil and the nutrients and feeding that, then it's not going to be happy and the plant's not going to be happy. If it has to work a lot to get in there, and it doesn't have all its nutrition in there, it's not going to explode. It's not going to be able to handle extreme heat or extreme cold. So biodynamics, I say, is organics on steroids.

Ron: You mentioned these inspirational chefs and people that helped you out and you've worked under and have worked for and with. The best in the industry, these chefs. What are the characteristics of a great mentor?

Victor: I think it's the ability... One is patience. You think of it almost as being a parent, right? You have to have patience. But you also know how to push and motivate everybody. Everybody reacts different. But I think that all the mentors I've had, they've known how to push me, and maybe push me to the point where it's a stretch, but not over it. Sometimes it might have been over, but a lot of times it was just stretching. Seeing what their capabilities are and then saying, okay, I think you can go a little bit further. I think I can put you in this environment and you'll be okay.

The ones that are still around, it's because they motivated teams and they had teams of people, and if they wanted to expand, they knew they had to invest in their people. So by having mentors that were able to push me and put me in situations and then... That's gratifying. That's what you want, that they trust in you to do that.

Ron: Victor, thank you very much for joining us today. This is Master Chef Ron DeSantis with Our Food Journey™. Thank you very much for listening, and see you next time.